Jumpers for goalposts

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

Cannon Fodder is a top-down, early RTS game of sorts, minus the base building elements, and with a heavy emphasis on action, making it immediately accessible. It was developed by Sensible Software and published by Virgin Interactive in 1993, and subsequently ported to DOS, Atari ST, Mega Drive, Game Boy Colour, SNES, Acorn Archimedes, Jaguar and 3DO.

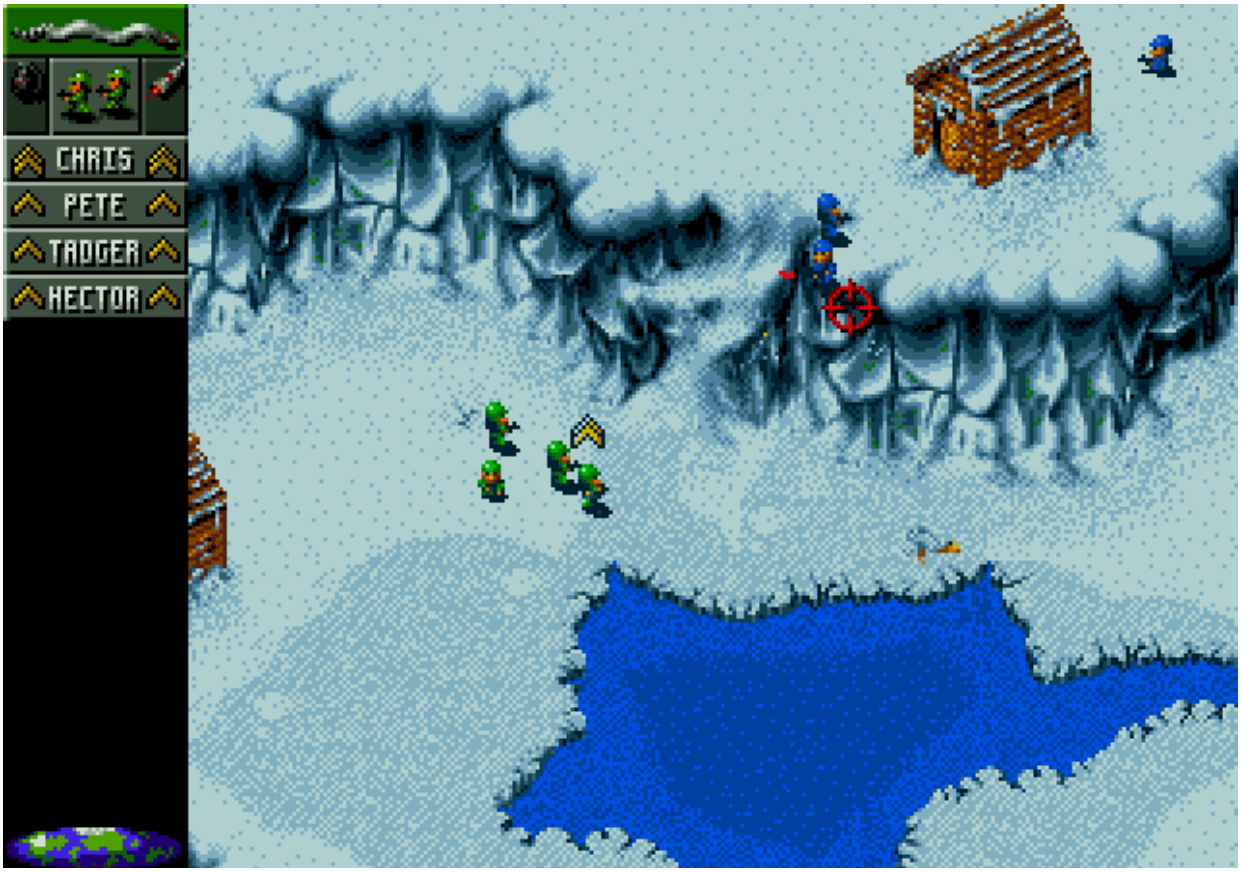
Employing an elegantly austere point and click control system, you take charge of a squad of up to five infantrymen in an epic odyssey through 72 environmentally diverse levels. You could find yourself stationed in a humid Vietnamese jungle, a barren desert, desolate moorlands, an underground sewer base, or the frozen wastelands of Antarctica. It seems war knows no boundaries.

Cannon Fodder's inspiration was threefold. It's a fusion of old-school, paper and pencil, fantasy war games, Ocean's Rambo: First Blood Part II and Lemmings, all of which struck a chord with the team at one juncture or another, during their misspent youth or as adults.

Initially, the goal was to create a Rambo game with a more strategic, troop aspect. From these humble beginnings,

Sensible almost 'winged' it and the game developed organically from there.

Sensible's approach to design was extremely analogue. Each level was plotted out on graph paper and tweaked along the way following ad-hoc brainstorming sessions. Nothing was left to chance.



Each mission begins with a brief illustrating the task at hand, though I find that they tend to fall into one of two camps; 'obliterate everything kit and caboodle' or 'rescue the hostages'. You achieve these objectives by utilizing a range of real-world weaponry such as machine guns, grenades, bazookas and even martial vehicles such as a skidoo, tank and helicopter in later levels.

It's not quite GTA, but if mowing down people with an array of transportation devices is your cup of tea, you'll be in clover here. It takes all sorts I suppose.

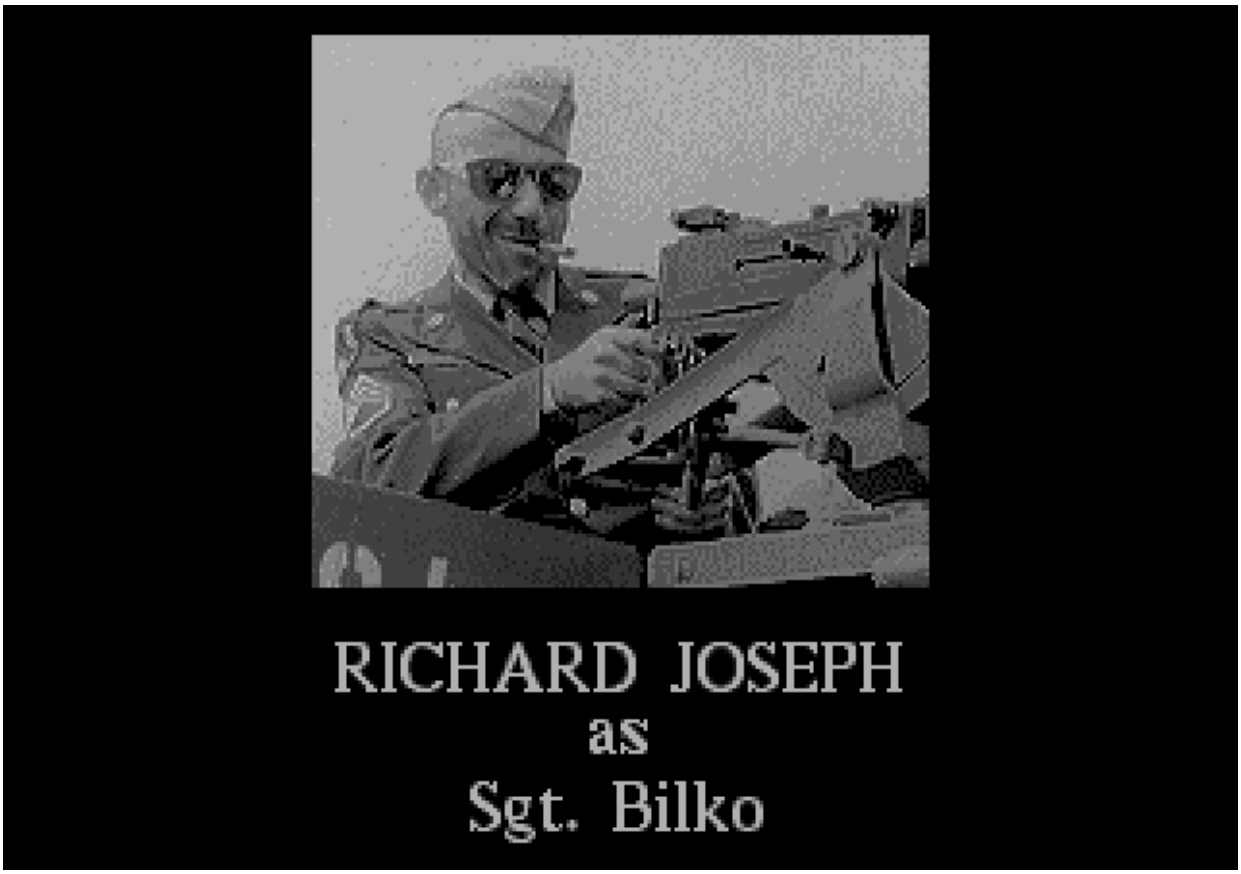
While in the preliminary stages you can get away with blithely traversing the landscapes as a trigger-happy quintet with little focus on stealth or strategy, you soon discover that unless you engage your wetware you'll find yourself riddled with more holes than a colander.

Often this entails paying more mind to planning, and how best to employ your limited ammunition and human resources (the diplomatic term for 'worker drones' in many of the offices I've worked in). Splitting your troops is an absolute necessity for many missions, particularly where coordinating multi-angle assaults to disorientate enemy troops and dilute their fire-power is the order of the day.

The old adage, 'don't put all your Sensi devs in one basket' has never been more pertinent; a phrase I believe that passed into common parlance because your inaugural

recruits take the abbreviated names or nicknames of designer, Jon 'Jops' Hare, programmer, Julian 'Jools' Jameson, artist, Stoo Cambridge and the late and sorely missed musician, Richard Joseph.

JOOLS
as
James Dean



In the sequel, making each soldier unique is taken to the next level. Amongst the recruits are The Beatles, Mario and Luigi, U2, the Four Evangelists, Crosby, Stills, Nash (And Young), and the sons of Noah (Shem, Ham and Japheth).

Sometimes the enemy and your comrades refuse to die cleanly and quietly. They can cling to the most slender thread of vitality, writhing in agony amidst their own entrails for what seems like an eternity. The only philanthropic course of action is to put them out of their misery... and surely enough this has been catered for.

What a curious dichotomy; Sensible seem to be taking great strides to humanise your troops, and yet simultaneously dismiss them as paltry 'cannon fodder', flippantly sacrificed to appease the god of war like lambs to slaughter.

What on earth could be going on? Is there the slightest outside chance that this could be a single ironic shell in a wider satirical armoury?

When the game's jovial, signature ska theme track proclaims, "war has never been so much fun", do Sensible mean it *literally*? Are they mocking the civilians who altruistically enlisted to fight in the world wars, often eschewing their fragile lives in the process? The cognitive dissonance was too much for the Daily Star; they took one look at the poppy graphic on Amiga Power's magazine cover (a reproduction of the intended box art) and it was like a red rag to an imbecile.

Clearly Sensible envisioned the possibility that their 'subtle' satire might be misconstrued, hence there's an exhortatory missive on the last page of the manual:

> "And on a more serious note: don't try playing this at home, kids, because war is not a game - war, as Cannon

> Fodder demonstrates in its own quirky little way, is a senseless waste of human resources and lives. We hope that you never have to find out the hard way."

Of course, the rabid press shock-jocks who wasted no time in vilifying Sensible wouldn't have contemplated opening that. Surely this would constitute an attempt at something approaching *research*.

Honestly, this is no joke. It's a genuine article taken from the Daily Star written just before the release of Cannon Fodder in 1993. The Star is one of the trashy, tabloid 'red tops', barely a comic book really, though sadly with a circulation of 424,453 according to their March 2015 statistics. They'll jump on any sensationalist bandwagon if it means stirring up controversy and shifting more copies of their wretched pulp fiction.

Poppy game insult to our war dead - exclusive by Jonathan Guy

> War veterans and MPs have slammed as "monstrous" a decision to use a Remembrance Poppy to illustrate a new computer game... called Cannon Fodder.
>
> The game, tipped to be the year's biggest seller, will make its debut at a show in London's Olypia from November 11 to 14 - Remembrance Sunday.
>
> Manufacturers Sensible Software say: "War has never been so much fun."
>
> The distinctive poppy symbol is featured on the game and on the front page of leading computer magazine Amiga Power, out on Armistice Day.

British Legion chiefs and MPs have branded the use of the poppy as appalling.

Offend

Royal British Legion spokesman Dennis York said: "This will offend millions at a time when they remember loved ones who gave their lives in war."

Liberal Democrat MP Menzies Campbell stormed: "It is monstrous that the poppy should be used in such a way."

Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, son of Britain's great field marshall said: "It is very unfortunate that anyone should see fit to detract from the poppy's place as a symbol of remembrance."

But a spokesman for Virgin Interactive Entertainment, which is marketing the game, said: "The poppy is there to remind consumers war is no joke."

Donation to the Royal British Legion should be sent to: The Poppy Appeal, 41 Pall Mall, London SW1.

Shameful

The poppy is a sacred reminder of the men and women who gave their lives in two world wars.

How sickening to see it being abused to sell a savage computer game.

The distributors say the poppy is there "to remind the customer that war is no joke."

That's just publicity writer's hypocrisy. Computer game designers compete to glorify war and viciousness.

How dare they use the poppy to turn truth on its head.

Make sure you don't buy this shameful game.

Daily Star newspaper article (26.10.93)

That said, they would have had to tread very carefully given that world war veterans are practically a protected species in this country (and rightly so). It would be commercial suicide to even hint at siding with Sensible, or delving beyond the hyperbole.

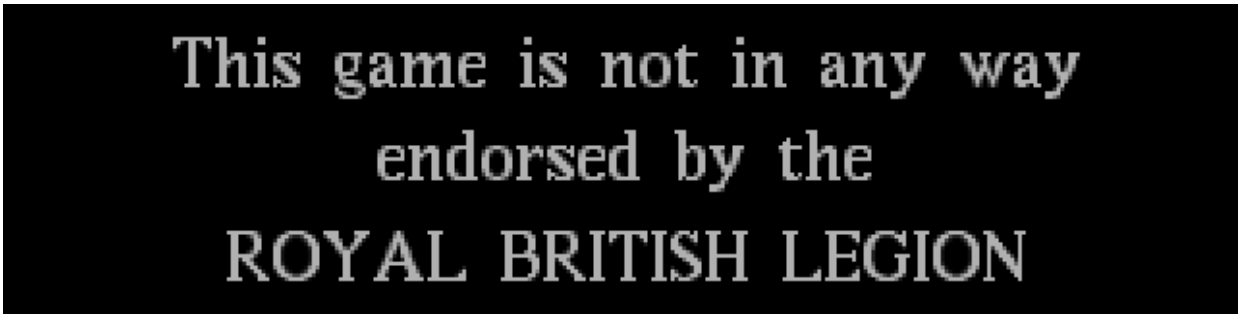
Even now people tend to wear poppies by default for fear of appearing disrespectful towards veterans whether they believe in the sentiment or not. If a celebrity slips up by forgetting to wear one, they're ruthlessly lambasted in the press.

We now have black and purple poppies as well as the more traditional white and red ones should people feel the need to narrow down their public allegiances. It has all become very political.

Equally clueless were the Royal British Legion. They accused Sensible of glorifying war without bothering to dig beyond the surface evidence of their box art, insisting they expunge the game of 'their' poppy.

While it's true that Stoo had modelled it on a commemorative poppy purchased from the Royal British Legion, isn't one poppy much the same as another? Is it even feasible to slap your trademark on a flower made by Mother Nature?

Regardless, the team acquiesced and agreed to pay the £500 compensation they were demanding. The disclaimer...



...was inserted into the game's opening title screen and manual, and at the 11th hour the offending poppy graphics were switched for those based on the real deal, foraged from a field in Saffron Walden (a market town in Essex where the Sensible offices had recently relocated to).

Likewise, the striking aesthetic of the original plain black box with a blood-red poppy on the front was supplanted with a nondescript depiction of a camouflaged soldier blending into a green and black woodland backdrop.

Despite these amenable compromises, Sensible had the final word, releasing the game on Remembrance Day in 1993 as planned.

Amiga Power intended to release the 'poppy issue' in which they reviewed Cannon Fodder on Armistice Day, though in the end played it safe by swapping the controversial image with screenshots of the game at the last minute, and made it available on a more neutral date.

Nevertheless, games critic and editor, Stuart Campbell - notorious for his gungho, antagonistic commentary - was sacked from his role at Amiga Power following his cheery remark, "Old soldiers? I wish them all dead." in issue 32, for which the magazine felt obliged to apologise.

In retaliation, he attempted to sue his former employers, Future Publishing, but lost the case, and subsequently

accepted the position of 'chief executive co-ordinating development director with special responsibility for gameplay' at Sensible Software.

The controversy didn't end there. In Germany Cannon Fodder was 'indexed' by the Federal Department for Media Harmful to Young Persons as it was deemed to contain graphic violence unsuitable for consumption by minors, effectively banning it from sale.

Curiously its sequel escaped the censors, perhaps because it took place in less realistic, alien or novelty environments, and we all know it's OK to shoot things if they don't look like you. Politicians sanction this all the time and surely they wouldn't lead us astray.

Had it all been a publicity stunt, Max Clifford himself would have doffed his cap in admiration. The Amiga version alone sold in excess of 100,000 copies and for the first time the Sensible brand entered the consciousness of the computer illiterati.

Games developers, Introversion Software, paid tribute to the lasting influence of 'Poppygate' in their isometric, real-time strategy game, Darwinia.

Superimposed over the introductory sequence is the Cannon Fodder theme tune, along with the spoof renunciation, "this game is not endorsed by Sensible Software".

Each successfully completed mission ends with a congratulatory debrief, your troops bounce with jubilation and a jaunty, brass band number kicks in. This is swiftly juxtaposed with a sombre, mournful dirge and a list of soldiers either victorious in battle or lost in service.

This, in fact, is the instrumental version of a song written by Jon Hare for the first girl he fell in love with when he was 18 years old. The sentiment resonates all the more poignantly given the wider significance.

Those that survive are promoted in rank, and their accuracy, rate of fire and range are upgraded, while any who succumb to enemy assault become gravestones on 'Boot Hill'. The more decorated they are when they fall, the more lavish their commemorative headstone. As though in homage to Sensible Soccer, the statistics are recorded with a 'home' and 'away' scoreboard, alluding to the notion that life and death outcomes are of no greater consequence than sport.

Complete a mission successfully and you are rewarded with 15 fresh recruits who join the enlistment queue at the foot of the hill to await their almost inevitable, grisly fate. It's practically a human sausage machine highlighting the

consequences of war in no uncertain terms. While the message is enveloped in an irreverently black comedic veneer, its moral anti-war thesis hits home like a trench-bound howitzer.

You are gradually eased into the action with new play mechanics, weapons and vehicles introduced one at a time so as not to overwhelm the player. Even amateur gamers will be able to complete the early stages, and the ability to save your game after each mission offers sufficient motivation to return at a later date to try again should you fail.

The difficulty curve is fair and smooth initially, however, unceremoniously you are soon dropped into a writhing alligator pit with no means of defence, metaphorically speaking. Some of the puzzles introduced in the later levels are fiendishly taxing, as is the frantic, unrelenting action.

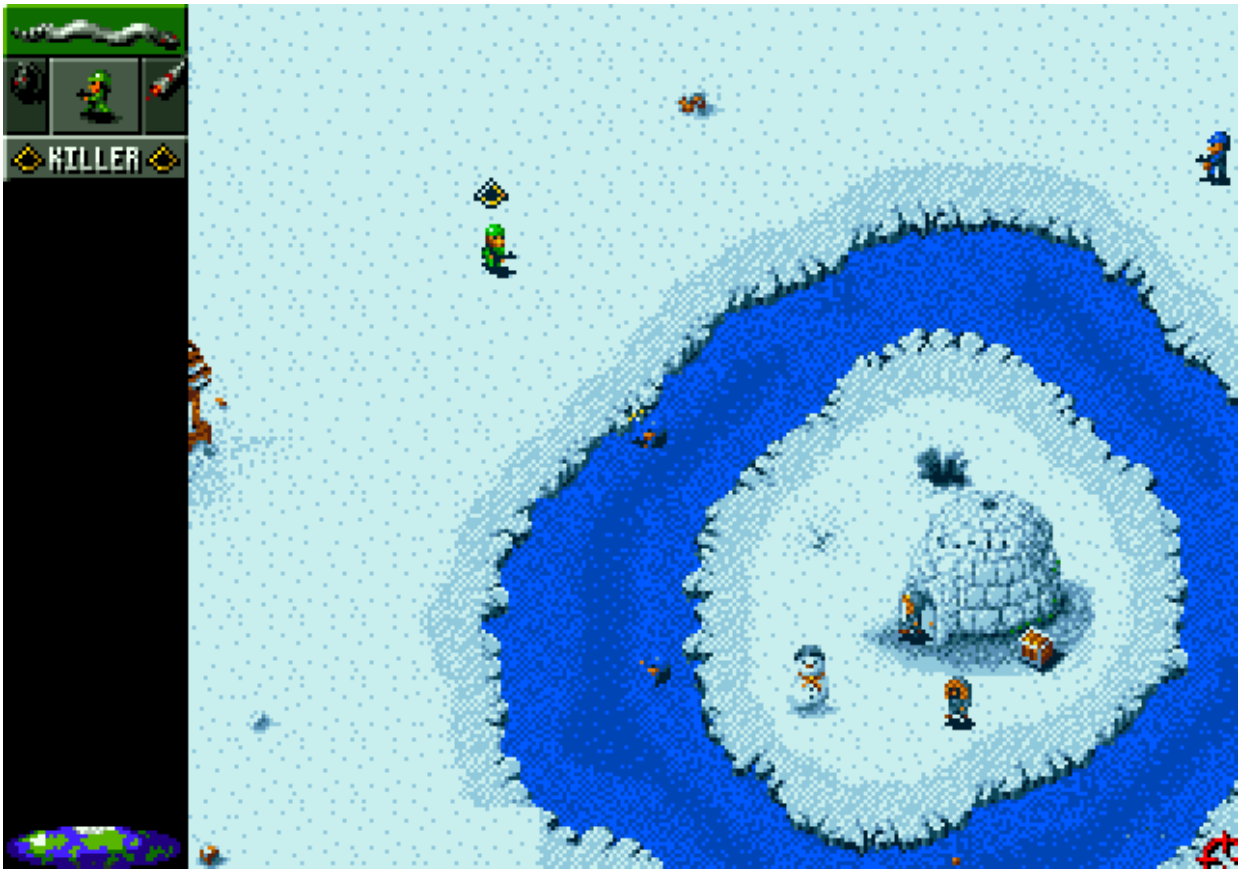
Hampering your progression further is your other major foe; water in the guise of streams, rivers and so on. Traipsing through these, naturally, your pace is slowed substantially, but more perplexing, you are unable to fire your weapons until you emerge at the shoreline. Were your guns made by the same company that made Marty McFly's hoverboard by any chance?

It's no mistake that an intensely provocative, pumping soundtrack to accompany the blood-soaked carnage is missing in action. Only in the movies are the machinations of war set against the backdrop of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra's rendition of Wagner's The Ride of the Valkyries.

Much like in real war, Cannon Fodder's OST amounts to the congruously eerie diegetic sound of silence, punctuated by rippling rivers, squawking Vietnamese wildlife and shrieking soldiers, enraptured in the death throes of a writhing soon-to-be-corpse.

If you've read the works of any of the notable first world war poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon you'll be familiar with the notion that war can be extremely monotonous, replete with protracted periods of vacuity and anxious anticipation.

Aside from the absence of harmonics, I sense this is alluded to with the inclusion of the snowman in the Arctic phases. Soldiers finding the time and inclination for such apparent frivolity isn't unheard of. In fact, it makes perfect sense that they would grasp at any opportunity to eek out a tenuous facade of normality from such a ludicrous scenario.



It would be ridiculous to try to inject parallax scrolling into the background of an isometric game, though that didn't hold back Stoo from crow-barring some into the cut scenes instead.

Not that you'd know it, a meagre 7 colours per layer were employed, combined with precise alignment of dual playfields and palette switching techniques to lend the perception of swift movement across dense forestland. This instils a sense of urgency while fleshing out the already immersive 2D environment in which your missions are coordinated.

Believe it or not, all the graphics are constructed within the limitations of a 16 colour palette, the tiny troops brought to life using the sub-pixel rendering technique which alternately cycles the colour shading of specific ranges of pixels to invoke the perception of movement.

If you were lucky enough to own a CD32 with an FMV module back in 1993, or a Panasonic 3DO console, you would have been treated to a movie quality introduction starring the game's developers themselves, reminiscent of the 'nerds as rock stars' vibe ushered in by The Bitmap Brothers.

This is no perfunctory, video-cos-we-can affair; its dark, wry humour is genuinely witty, losing none of its quirky, British charm 23 years after it was first unveiled.

Shot in a single day with a puny budget of £500, the crew wielding novelty toy guns and kitted out in military toggery and novelty face masks, goof around engaging in all manner of soldierly shenanigans from riding in a Gladys half-track to taking potshots at a Hitlerised pin-up of Christian Slater. It's a wonderfully offbeat blend of Blackadder Goes Forth and Benny Hill-style accelerated locomotion techniques.

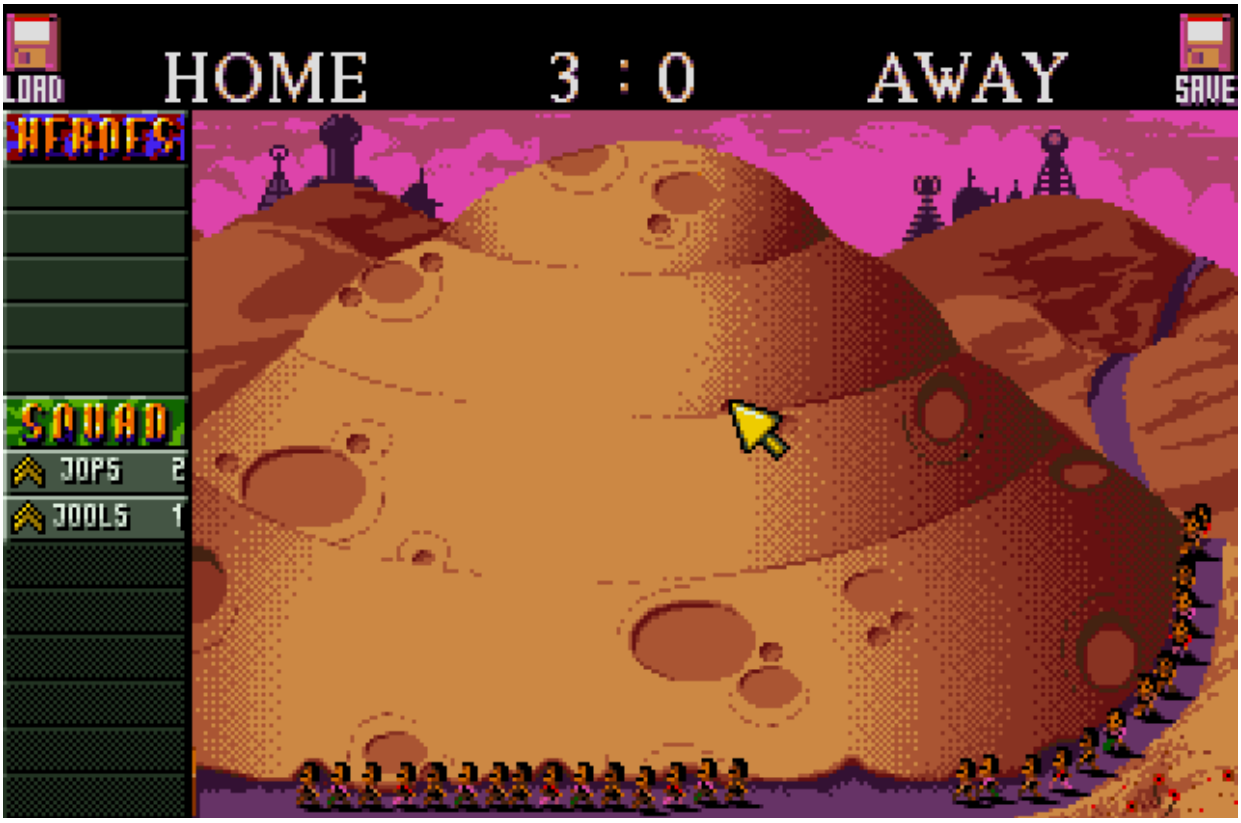
Real-world footage is interspersed with in-game screenshots swirling in and out of focus using transition effects that would feel right at home in an episode of the original Batman and Robin series. Holy hand grenades, it's jolly spiffing stuff!

One of the highlights has to be the parody of the war film trope where we see the leads exchange photos and croon over their yearned for, distant sweethearts. The twist here is that one of them is a goat wearing stockings and suspenders. Goats are people too you know!

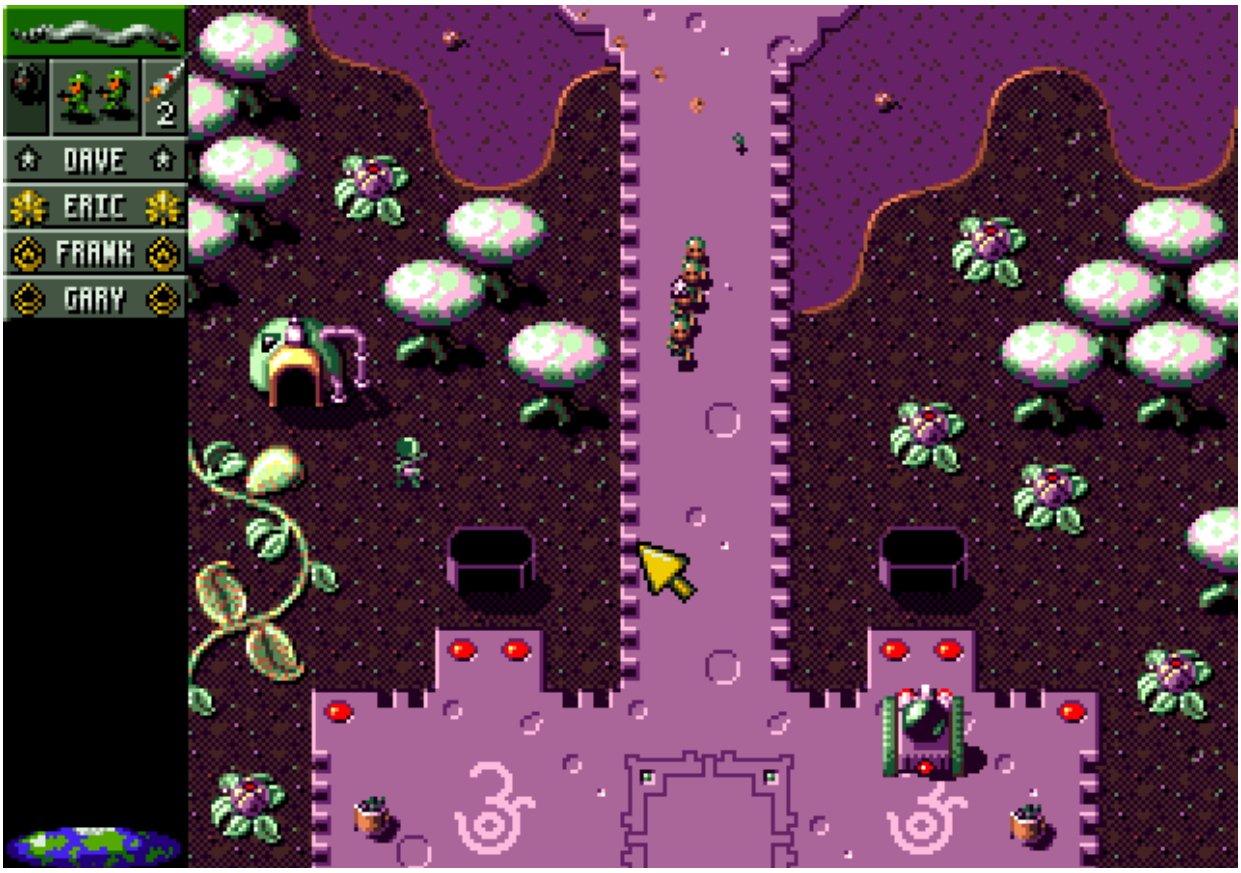
Having captured the enemy leader - the unnamed, el presidente - you have one more 'Donkeydeathtasticelastic', 'obliterate the buildings' phase to tick off your to-do list, and that's a wrap. Cut!

Your anti-climactic reward is an advert for what was then Sensible's upcoming game, Sensible Golf, a static black and white picture of the developers and a 'the end' stamp. They clearly didn't have high hopes of anyone ever seeing it! In consolation, we do at least get to revel in another rendition of Jon's evergreen 'Narsissus' track. I'll never tire of that.

1994 saw the release of Cannon Fodder part deux, which many critics dubbed little more than a data disk owing to the familiar gameplay mechanics, festooned with more contemporary, novelty settings and adversaries, and a time travel plot weaving them all together.



It was designed by ex-Amiga Power journalist and editor, Stuart Campbell, and features medieval, gangster and alien-themed scenarios... and lots and lots of purpleage in the colour palette department.



In contrast to the first game, the sequel is weighted heavily towards smaller maps and unadulterated, condensed arcade action.

Two demo spin-off games were given away via magazine cover disks. 'Cannon Soccer' was presented with Amiga Format's 1994 Christmas issue and sees you do battle with football players lifted straight from Sensible Soccer in a snow-capped, festive landscape.

Though long before Cannon Fodder's release, in January 1993, Amiga Power brought us the demo, 'Sensible Soccer 92/93 Meets Bulldog Blighty'. Take Sensible Soccer, swap the players for soldiers and the ball for an unpredictably explosive grenade, and voila! mash-up mayhem ensues.

It's much like playing pass the parcel with a bomb. If you're left holding it when the music stops, your prize is a swift trip to the next life. The last man standing wins the round.

With Jon Hare's input as co-designer, Codemasters developed a refurbished version of Cannon Fodder for the Game Boy Colour, published by Activision in 2000. It features full-motion video sequences and digitized speech, in addition to new unit types/soldiers and end of level boss battles. You play the game with a maximum of two soldiers on-screen simultaneously, supported by parachuted in replacements as and when your original tag team kick the bucket.

Jon was commissioned by Codemasters to produce a 3D remake of Cannon Fodder and even spent two years developing the title before his satellite studio in Hammersmith was shut down and the project cancelled due to financial difficulties. In 2006 Codemasters announced that Cannon Fodder 3 would be released exclusively for the PSP, though of course it never came to fruition.

Also in 2006, a mobile version of Cannon Fodder for old-school, 'dumb' J2ME/Symbian phones was developed by Jon Hare's new company, Tower Studios, on behalf of new IP owners, Codemasters, though it has yet to make the transition to more modern Android/iOS-based smartphones.

The game has since shown up in some of the least likely places. A novelty plug and play TV version made by Radica based on the SEGA Mega Drive port can be found in 'boy's toys' outlets such as Firebox. It forms part of the 'Arcade Legends' bundle which also includes Mega Drive ports of two other Sensible games; Sensible Soccer and Mega-Lo-Mania.

In 2007, Codemasters granted permission to developers Berut CT and Game Factory Interactive to produce a 3D sequel for the Russian market. Cannon Fodder 3 was released in 2011, and also made available to European and North American gamers the following year.

Mission 03
The Obvious Menace!
Your objective is to destroy all enemy buildings. 6 weapon boxes have been dropped to this location - try to find it.

It was plagued by technical and 'Engrish' issues and wasn't well-received by nostalgic fans of the original games, who quite rightly were dubious of a game purporting to be from the same cannon as the first two, yet that was in no way influenced by the Sensible team.

Computer gamers often wonder how well a mouse-driven game like Cannon Fodder fares when ported to a joypad-centric console.

Playing on the SNES, it's possible to use the official Nintendo rodent peripheral (as bundled with Mario Paint), or the joypad as you would with the Mega Drive port. The d-pad simulates the way the mouse manoeuvres your cursor, while the first fire button instructs your troops to walk to a designated position, and the second instigates your trigger action. I'm told it's second nature if you grew up using joypads.

On the other hand, the mobile version is torture. You rotate a cursor through a 360-degree plane until it's pointing in the direction you wish to travel, and then press a button on your keypad to advance to that position. As if that wasn't unwieldy enough, you can only fire in the direction you're currently facing. Try defending yourself from a surprise onslaught with a control mechanism like that!

Amiga Power ranked Cannon Fodder as the sixth-best game of all time, and in 2004 Retro Gamer magazine readers voted it no. 61 in their top retro game chart. Critics writing for the English language Amiga publications at the time of release struggled to find significant fault With Sensible's war-themed ickle-people-em-up, their final assessment falling within the 90% to 95% spectrum.

Cannon Fodder was no fluke; Sensible produced seven number one games over the course of the company's thirteen-year life-cycle, and were acknowledged as 'Developers of the Year' two years in a row in 1992 and 1993.

So, in hindsight how should we assess Cannon Fodder's legacy? Did Sensible deserve the flak they endured? Surely the best judges would have been the war veterans who had actually played their magnum opus. Were there any? Were they even consulted? Had Cannon Fodder been afforded their approval, surely only gamers would be aware of it today, and where's the controversy in that? "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story" - the golden rule of journalism - has rarely resonated so pertinently.

War games are ten a penny today and no-one bats an eyelid. Have our senses been dulled to the horrific consequences of

war, or is it just that it's OK to exploit such themes in pursuit of entertainment if you maintain a straight face whilst you do it? That would certainly explain why Call of Duty gets a free pass.

The backlash is now stagnant water under the bridge, and Sensible Software long since defunct. Now the silt has settled, what remains is a wistfully remembered, iconic strategy game that broke new ground at the time and has yet to be surpassed by anything that preceded it on any platform.

Time *has* been kind to Cannon Fodder. It persistently features prominently in 'retro games that deserve a remake' lists, and by popular demand, you'll find the emulated DOS version (and its sequel) on Good Old Games right now, such is the eternal appetite for its uncomplicated, addictive arcade

gameplay, divine pixel art and quintessentially indelible soundtrack.

Jon's doing OK too. He prevails as the engaging, immeasurably talented and prolific singer-song-writer-coder-artist he always was, and still performs the uncut version of 'War Has Never Been So Much Fun' at retro revival events since fans will stop at nothing short of *demanding* it. Savvy bunch Amigans.